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"No Comprendo"

A Message from
Mexico

S. G. INMAN



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"NO 'COMPRENDO"

I saw a cartoon the other day that represented beautiful Miss Liberty giving a lecture to a desperado, who, as he flourished a revolver, seemed to be trying to make out who the young lady was. On the brim of his wide sombrero was written "Mexico," and he was saying, "*No comprendo.*" The disturbed conditions south of the Rio Grande are proving only too clearly that indeed he does not understand. The deep truths of democracy are yet beyond his ken. He has not learned how to accept defeat with grace, to discuss issues without personalities, to confide in his fellow man, to unite factions for the common good. He has not learned to go two miles with the man who compels him to go one; that the man who hears and does is the man whose house stands; that before the tower is built one must sit down and count the cost; that he who puts his hand to the plow must not look back; that only he who loses his life shall find it again.

All this we must candidly admit. But whose fault is it that he does not know these things? His own? The Mexican learns when he has a chance. I want to show you that he has had no chance—that his "*No comprendo,*" far from being the flippant response of a don't-care, the

subject for the funny column of a newspaper, is really the wail of a neglected soul, rent with grief and passion, who finds no one to explain the deep mysteries of life. "Understandest what thou readest?" was the historic question asked the desert traveler. His reply, "How can I, save some man shall guide?" is never taken as a lack of ability, but only as a just appeal for help.

The Mexican has had no man to guide. Education and self-expression have been denied him for the four hundred years since the white man first set foot upon his soil. Let us take a rapid glance at these years. The names of four men—Cortez, Hidalgo, Juarez, Diaz—with the gaps filled in by political oppression and revolution on the one hand, and the constant intrigues of the priests to keep the people in ignorance on the other—this makes up Mexico's history. Cortez, who conquered the aborigines in 1520, was one of the most astute and unprincipled adventurers the world has ever known. Accompanying him were a band of priests. The natives were compelled to bow to the Spanish king and the Pope at the same time. "Christianity, instead of fulfilling its mission of converting and sanctifying, was itself converted. Paganism was baptized. Christianity was paganized." The people lived in practical slavery for three hundred years. On September 16, 1810, Miguel Hidalgo raised the cry of revolt against this terrible oppression. But his love for liberty was not accompanied by a genius for leadership, and soon he

and his fellow leaders were captured and shot. Then followed a continuous revolution for fifty years, in which independence from Spain was gained, only to be lost in strife between her own unprincipled leaders.

Out of this carnage of blood and disorder appeared one of the greatest men ever produced by the two Americas. Benito Juarez laid the ax at the root of the tree. He saw that his country could never have political liberty till it had religious liberty. He confiscated large amounts of church property, separated completely church and state, gave the nation her present magnificent constitution, repelled the French invasion, and was about to establish a series of reforms and an educational system for which the people had waited all these centuries when he was suddenly cut off by death. Fresh struggles for the presidential chair finally resulted in its occupancy by Porfirio Diaz, who retained it from 1876 till 1911, with the exception of four years. His strong hand forced peace and brought about marvelous material progress. But free speech was still repressed, and while a few more people learned to read, they must still reply in a large measure to the question, "Understandest thou what thou readest?" with the wail, "How can I, save some man guide?"

Is it any wonder when the country was so suddenly changed from a despotism to a democracy by the Madero revolution, that it has been impossible to keep down disturbances? The change was needed, but it was made too

suddenly. Just like Turkey, like Portugal, like China, a period of trial and stress must be passed through. History emphasizes this to us repeatedly. Think of the long, dark days of the reconstruction period after our own civil war. We began learning our lessons in democracy in 1215, when King John granted the Magna Charta, and when Wickliff translated the Bible into the language of the common people. And yet, it would seem that with our strikes and riots, with our problems of the trusts and child labor, with the open saloon and the trampling of our flag under foot in anarchistic demonstrations, that we ourselves still have a few serious problems to settle. Let us quit thanking the Lord that we are not like this publican, at least long enough to inquire why? "Understandest thou what thou readest?" "No comprendo." "How can I, save some man guide me?"

It is good to know that the Disciples of Christ are doing something at least to show to Mexico that we believe we are our brother's keeper, and to help him to understand what he reads. The work, under the name of the People's Institute, situated in the border city of Piedras Negras, has emphasized especially the elevation of the community life, and the interpreting the two nations to each other. It is housed in a beautiful little building erected by the generosity of friends, both American and Mexican, who believe in this kind of service. Among the various methods of work are lectures on moral and social themes, night classes

in different courses, a reading room, library in Spanish and a debating society.

What we call *conferencias morales* have been of intense interest. They are really a preaching service. A theme, such as "Friendship," "Happiness," "The Dignity of Work," "The Need of Tolerance," is announced, and the leading men of the city are invited to take part in the discussion. After the director opens the discussion, others are called upon to express their opinions. All are encouraged to say exactly what they think. At the conclusion the director sums up the discussion, and urges the teachings of the Man of Galilee on the question. These meetings are largely made up of men who would not think of going to a Protestant preaching service, but who are willing thus to study the same problems, presented in a different form. Our debating society acts largely in the same way. Moral questions have been discussed in the frankest way, and sledgehammer blows hit against national and personal vices, before large companies of people.

At the close of the Madero revolution, when the people suddenly discovered they were to elect their own officials, they understood not what they read. The way to organize a political party and carry on an election campaign was entirely foreign to their understanding. We considered it a privilege, when they sought our help, to give it to them. In fact, we loaned them our auditorium for their meetings, and it was there the reform mayor, that has done so much for the city, was nominated. A

prominent citizen recently declared that there was not a man who had been prominent in the new political activities of the city who had not gotten his training in the debating society and night classes of the institute.

After what we had said of the prejudice of the two nations, we would hardly expect to see the Mexicans coming together to celebrate the Fourth of July. Yet that is what happened at our institute, and a more enthusiastic celebration you never saw—all in Spanish, except the reading of the Declaration of Independence and the singing of the national hymn—but this by the Mexicans. The institute is, in fact, the meeting place of several nations. Not long ago Brazil sent a special representative to Mexico and the United States to study the cultivation of cotton. The gentleman happened to get to the City of Mexico at the wrong time, failed to get the data he sought, and was leaving the country, with not a very good impression. He missed connection of trains in Piedras Negras. We met him, and, finding also Señor Dominguez, the Burbank of Mexico, who is one of our consulting committee, and often gives conferences at the institute, we arranged a joint conference of the institute. Señor Dominguez gave the gentleman the information he was seeking, and he went away with another idea of Mexico, and grateful impressions of our work and Protestant Christianity, with which he was unfamiliar before.

When this work was opened, the people were very suspicious of it. It was difficult to

get them to realize even that entrance to the reading room was free, and in no way committed them to our religious convictions. The parish priest waged an incessant war, and for a long time it kept many away, especially women. But our work is so recognized by all now that we have entertained the government officials and other prominent visitors to the city. Not long ago the bank presented the institute with a note of \$800, and we had not a dollar with which to pay it. A campaign of three days, in the time when there was most talk about intervention and the business outlook was most dark, the money was raised among the representative people of the city. But four of the men approached refused to contribute.

On September 16, 1911, when a mob raged up the principal street, stoning the houses of foreigners, they passed the institute without any demonstration whatever and, returning to the monument in front of our property, listened to incendiary speeches, without even reference to the foreigners and Protestants who conducted the People's Institute. The governor of the state, who came to the city the next day, said it was one of the most splendid tributes he ever saw paid to a work of like character. At a celebration of the reform laws, a national holiday, all of the orators of the occasion were People's Institute men, and the night meeting, contrary to all custom, was held at the institute building, with the mayor presiding. He said the next morning in com-

menting on the matter: "We are only beginning to realize the good you are doing for our city. I am going to work to see that you have a tenfold increase in your work which is doing so much for this community." Such words of approval confirm the wisdom of the policy pursued at the People's Institute.

On a February 22, Washington's birthday, the political situation was dark indeed. It looked as if the whole country had turned against the Madero government. We called a meeting at the institute, to which we invited all the government officials and prominent citizens, and read a part of the farewell address of Washington, which we had translated for the occasion, and which seemed to have been written especially to advise the Mexicans in their national crisis. The necessity of standing by the constituted government, the cost of ignoring authority, the necessity of allowing time for reforms to be carried out, were emphasized. A committee was organized to conduct conferences in the theater on the same subject. In two weeks such meetings were being held all over the republic, and the government was saved, at least temporarily. Of course, that meeting did not do it all, but it had its influence, no doubt.

Considering the close proximity of Mexico to our own country, it is difficult indeed to realize why we have done so little to answer her appeal for light and guidance. It is certainly not because we have not come in contact with her needs. As surprising as our criminal

neglect of her spiritual development is our wonderful interest in her material growth. The people of the United States have \$1,000,000,000 invested in the mines, railroads, lands and industries of Mexico. One thousand million dollars! And how much have we invested in schools and churches? It will hardly reach one million dollars. Only one one-thousandth part of the total investment! Some time ago a representative of the Guggenheim interests in the republic told me that there were one million Mexicans dependent upon their plants and allied ones for a living. And how many ministers of the Gospel, both foreign and Mexican, are employed by all the Home and Foreign Missionary Societies of the whole Protestant world to work for Mexico's elevation? Two hundred! Two hundred ministers to preach the Gospel to 16,000,000 Mexicans. A parish of 80,000 for each man. To teach the 12,000,000 who do not know how to read and write, we have 190 schools. To convert the 3,000,000 Indians who live entirely untouched by civilization and our holy religion, we have—not one single worker.

Facing this neglect, can we afford to criticize and condemn the Mexican people for their present reign of blood and horror? Should it not rather cause us to cry out to God for forgiveness for this awful neglect during these long years of opportunity?

“Understandest what thou readest?” “How can I, save some man guide me?” May it be, when some Dr. Luke of the twentieth century

writes the New Acts of the Apostles, that he shall be able to record that, though after long hesitancy, 10,000 Philipps came down from the north, obeying the angel's voice, and, hearing the said wail, climbed up into the chariot and preached unto the desert traveler, Christ.

Then shall the Mexican, as the Ethiopian of old, go on his way rejoicing, the riddle of life explained, his burden rolled away, his soul transformed into the image of the Prince of Peace!

Will you generously give yourselves to this great work?

BITS OF CONVERSATION

The following bits of conversation show how our mission work has received attention and endorsement such as would have been impossible in the old days before the Madero revolution:

"I am a walking advertisement for the Institute," said a young man who works in the railroad shops. "Ever since that Sunday you met me on my way to the bull fight, and told me I was on the wrong road, I have practically given up going anywhere except to the Institute. I have not drunk a drop since that day, and I never tire of telling my friends what you have done for me, or urging them to come to the Institute. I am a different man. My family and friends all want to know what has changed me, and it is a great pleasure to tell them that it is all due to your work."

"Hello, is that the People's Institute?" said a voice over the telephone. "This is the secretary of the Anti-Re-election Club, and I have been instructed by our executive committee to see if we might have the use of your assembly room for a meeting of the club next Tuesday. Also, we have some important questions to discuss, and, as you know, are new at the business, we would like for you to be present and advise with us on these matters." This is a sample of the requests that have come since

the new political regime in Mexico, when for the first time the people have been allowed to engage in selecting their officials and saying something about the policies their nation shall pursue. In their ignorance of procedure in the organization of political parties, it has been given those in charge of the People's Institute to be helpful along these lines, and to influence in the selection of the best candidates for office. In a recent public meeting it was stated by one of the speakers that there was not a man prominent in the new political life of the city who had not received his training for this work in the debating society or the night classes of the Institute.

"How sorry I am that I did not know you were in the city," said the Governor of the state to the Director of the Institute, when he called on him at the State Capitol. "There was a committee here to see me today from San Pedro about forming a night school for the workmen. I told them about the great work of your school in Piedras Negras, and gave them your name for correspondence. How splendid it would have been if they could have talked to you personally as to their plans. By the way, let me present you to a good friend of mine who is planning to start some night schools for us here in Saltillo. He will want you to help us with these. The idea of the reform government is not only to better our public school system, but provide instruction at night for adults. Your school is the first,

and we will look to you for much help in establishing these new ones."

"Why didn't I ever hear religion explained in that common sense way before? Since I have begun to think for myself, I have never been able to accept the religion of the priests. For a number of years I have abandoned all religion, and read the works of the agnostics. It is going to be hard to come to a simple faith in God again. But I want to. The way you talk of prayer as a fellowship with God, a consultation with Him about our life plans, a harmonizing our will with that of the Infinite One, makes a deep appeal to me. I feel the need of such a power in my life. I wonder if I can ever get to it? I wonder if you would take the time to discuss these things regularly once a week with me and a few of my friends, entering into detailed explanations showing, as you claim, that modern science is not an enemy, but a friend, to religion?" Thus spoke a young professor of the public schools to us as we were endeavoring to get him to realize his need of Christ. Mexico is full of such young men, who have become dissatisfied with Catholicism, and have turned to the writings of French agnostics for guidance. Yet by approaching them in scientific and philosophical terms, they can be interested in the Gospel, and by patience and sympathy be finally won to Christ. These young men are now, or will be soon, the nation's leaders. To win the nation, they must be won.

"The Governor thinks that he never heard of such a striking testimony of the splendid way in which a work is regarded as the attitude the mob assumed toward your building one night, when they were destroying property. They came up the main street shouting against the foreigners and the people of the former political regime, and broke in doors and windows of a number of Spaniards, the American saloon, the Chinese hotel, and the home of some of the friends of former President Diaz, and passed your place three times, each time stopping there to hear speeches in front of the monument which stands in front of your building. Yet in spite of the fact that you were both foreigners and Protestants, the mob did not make a single demonstration against you. That to him is wonderful. He is greatly impressed with the work, and says that it is greatly to be hoped that you may inaugurate it in other cities also." Thus spoke a gentleman who is a close personal friend of Governor Carranza.

"Why don't you come to our city and establish a work of that kind," said a business man whose home we visited. "We have nothing here to raise the ideals of the people. We are all losing interest in the Catholic church, and we have nothing else to take its place. We have no place to take our families of evenings. We have no place to send our children to school, when they finish the fifth grade. We have no one to lead us in the new political life we are entering. You have no idea what good

you could do here with a work such as you have established at Piedras Negras."

Said one of the principal lawyers of Saltillo: "We are in the greatest need of a work of this kind in Saltillo. We have many schools and churches, but we have nothing to get the people together on a common basis like your Institute. I will help you in every way possible. Urge upon your Society the starting of this work here. It will give more results than you can imagine."

Yesterday a traveling man said: "Why don't you enter Torreon? It is growing more rapidly than any city in Mexico, and it is also the most needy of any I ever saw. It is wide open, and it actually seems as if there are no elevating influences whatever. I believe the rich men there would take an active interest in the opening of a work for the elevation of the community life. There are the greatest kind of opportunities. Don't fail to push this matter right away."

And so we could go on quoting calls that we are receiving constantly for the enlargement of our work already established and the entering of new fields. What shall we say to these calls? The home base must reply.

LETTERS FROM PROMI- NENT MEN ABOUT THE PEOPLE'S INSTITUTE

FROM THE "BURBANK OF MEXICO."

It is a great satisfaction to me, and at the same time I believe my duty, to recommend the work of the People's Institute, which is under the direction of Prof. S. G. Inman, because I believe it to be of great help in the education of our people—the only means by which they can obtain true progress.

It has been with the greatest pleasure that I have contributed to this work with my lectures on agriculture, and I shall continue in my sphere of action to co-operate in the enlargement of the Institute, which I do not doubt will find philanthropic friends who will help such an untiring gentleman as Prof. Inman in his humanitarian task, which so honors and benefits our people.

ZEFORINO DOMINGUEZ.

FROM THE ADMINISTRATOR OF THE
CUSTOM HOUSE.

It is with great pleasure that I present to you my good friend, the Director of the People's Institute, from which this city and various

others of the frontier receive great benefit, principally from its active propaganda of culture and morality. This work has been so well received by our people that the absolute necessity is clearly seen of enlarging the building in order to carry out more perfectly the educational work which is planned.

The organization of this Institution is most excellent, it being the only one of its kind in the country, and its tendencies, its building, its excellent location (in front of the Custom House), make it most acceptable; and it has been satisfactory to me to observe personally the good work of Prof. Inman, for which cause I feel it is a real honor to us Mexicans who love progress to give our financial help for the enlargement of an institution so beneficent as the People's Institute.

A. A. BEREÄ.

FROM THE "PRESIDENTE MUNICIPAL" OF PIEDRAS NEGRAS.

I am honored in presenting to you most attentively my good friend, Señor S. G. Inman, a resident of this city, who is at the head of the most modern educational work in the republic. The direction of the People's Institute is in his charge, this institution being of an exceptional character, as it carries on not only special courses for working men, but also conferences and lectures on civic, industrial and moral themes, given by competent persons from different places; a public reading room; athletic department; a debating club, where our

citizens prepare themselves for our democratic contests under the restrictions of peace and law.

Under the transcendent importance of this work the Governor of the state has decreed a certain amount of help, but on account of the many financial responsibilities this help is not commensurate with the great need of this Institution. The present building cost \$10,000, which was raised by the solicitation of personal contributions by the Director. There is still, however, a balance due on the building, and to raise this and to enlarge the building, adding baths, a public clinic, some dormitories for poor young men who wish a higher education, etc., Señor Inman finds himself in the necessity of appealing to the generosity of some of our prominent citizens to aid in this great work, and I urge such persons as desire to figure among the benefactors of the People's Institute to aid liberally in this work, which will honor our country.

A proof of the prestige of this Institution is that Señor Venustiano Carranza, Governor of the State; Señor J. de la Sa Pereyra, special envoy of Brazil; Señor Andres Osuna, ex-Superintendent of Education in the State of Coahuila; Señor J. Kim Yuen, representative of the Chinese Empire; Lic. Eliseo Arredondo, Secretary of the State, and many others who have visited the Institute, have expressed the highest regard for this work, which all good Mexicans should favor.

LIC. ENRIQUE DEL CASTILLO.

FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE ASSO-
CIATED ADVERTISING CLUBS OF
AMERICA, BOSTON.

I want to add a personal word of interest and approval for the splendid work you are doing. It seems to me you are decidedly on the right track. Our Sunday night meetings at Ford Hall must be precisely in spirit what you are attempting in Mexico.

I wish you every success. There must be some way found of getting people together in spite of political and religious differences if democracy is to prevail.

GEORGE W. COLEMAN.

FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE MEXICAN
COAL AND COKE COMPANY,
NEW YORK.

Having seen the success of your work among our coal miners at Las Esperanzas, Coahuila, and realizing from personal acquaintance the broad and deep Christian spirit and vigorous energy with which you are striving for the elevation of the people of Northern Mexico, I am greatly interested in the new work you have undertaken. I only wish that I were able to contribute more than I have toward this new and promising missionary development.

JAS. T. GARDINER.